



## Aina-Kizz and the Black-Bearded Bai

*Uzbekistan and Central Asia*

Once upon a time there was a girl, who lived with her mother in a half-ruined house on the outskirts of Samarkand. Her father had died shortly after the girl was born, and her mother had worked tirelessly to ensure her daughter's wellbeing in a world built to suit men.

The mother went daily out from the city into the fields in search of firewood, which she then tried to sell in Samarkand. Fortunately, for these purposes, she had an old horse and a mule, without whom she would not have been able to make a living and feed her daughter.

The girl, whose name was Aina-Kizz, was incredibly clever, and her ingenuity had not gone unnoticed among the inhabitants of the region. In fact, many women, especially widows, went to visit the girl for advice when they had to make dealings with unscrupulous men.

One day, the mother went further from the city than she had gone before and she returned with the horse and mule both loaded with wood.

'Tomorrow morning, I will go to the Chorsu bazaar,' she told the girl. 'I will try to sell all this wood. Maybe I'll get a better price for it there and, when I return, I will bring you a small gift, my daughter.'

'Thank you, mother,' the girl replied. 'But be careful, please. Do not forget that in the market, what one person earns is lost by another.'

Very early next morning, the woman loaded the horse up again and left for the Chorsu, the bazaar in the centre of Samarkand, near the

Registan. She settled outside the bazaar with her horse and waited for someone to want to buy her firewood. Late that morning, a richly clad bai in a silk robe approached, stroking his black beard.

‘Woman, how much do you want for that wood?’ He asked casually, without even looking at her face.

‘It is just a tanka, sir,’ the woman replied.

‘Would you sell me the firewood exactly as it is?’ asked the bai looking the horse up and down.

The woman nodded without understanding what the man meant.

‘Here you have your coin, woman,’ the bai said extending his hand, and added ‘but you will have to follow me to leave your merchandise.’

The bai led the woman with her horse through a maze of streets in the rich area of the city, until they reached a luxurious mansion. After entering the stables, the woman began to untie the ropes that held the firewood to the horse when the black-bearded bai shouted in her ear:

‘Stop! I bought your firewood “exactly as it is,” and that means that the horse also belongs to me, because the firewood is on it.’

‘But ... this ... this is an outrage,’ the woman raised her voice when realised she had been deceived.

‘If you do not like the deal, we can go visit the judge,’ the bai replied harshly.

They both went to visit the judge who, frowning, observed the fine silk robe of the bai and gave his verdict: the woman had received exactly what, according to the agreement, she had requested. There was no room for any claim.

The rich bai gave the woman a look of contempt over his shoulder. She returned home, her face stained with tears.

‘What’s wrong, mother?’ Asked Aina-Kizz.

The mother told her what had happened, lamenting that she had lost their horse, which was all that kept them from complete poverty.

‘Don’t worry, mother,’ said the girl. ‘Tomorrow I will go to the Chorsu with the mule and some of the leftover firewood. Maybe I can recover some of the ground that was lost.’

The next day, at dawn, Aina-Kizz loaded the mule with firewood and left for the Chorsu. Once there, she stationed herself in a visible place and waited for a possible buyer to approach.

Not long after, the same black-bearded bai approached the girl.

‘Little girl, how much do you want for that wood?’ Asked the evil bai.

‘Two tankas,’ Aina-Kizz replied.

‘Would you sell me this firewood exactly as it is?’

‘Of course!’ Said the girl. ‘If you give me the coins exactly as they are.’

‘Clearly, little girl!’ The bai exclaimed with a wily smile, showing her the two gold coins on the palm of his hand. ‘But you will have to follow me.’

After reaching his stables, the bai offered Aina-Kizz the two gold coins, but the girl did not take them.

‘Sir, you have bought the wood “exactly as it is,” and therefore you now own both the wood and the mule. But you told me that you would give me the coins “exactly as they are,” so I want you give me your arm too ... please.’

The bai opened his eyes wide, as if he had seen a corpse rising from the dead. He took a step backwards, his mouth opening and closing like a fish, but no sound came out. Finally, he managed an outburst of curses on the girl.

‘If you don’t like the deal, we can go visit the judge,’ said Aina-Kizz without being bothered by his insults.

They both went to visit the judge, who, could not help the bai, as he had done on the previous occasion. As a judge, he could not retract on a verdict that, moreover, he had given only one day before. So, the judge ruled that the black-bearded bai had to pay two gold tankas for the firewood and another fifty more tankas as a substitution for his arm!

The bai, out of his mind with anger, refused to be defeated by a simple 'little girl,' so that, in front of the judge, he challenged Aina-Kizz:

'You took advantage of me, brat, but where is a sparrow to be compared with a hawk? I bet that you can't tell a lie bigger than the one I will tell. I bet five hundred gold tankas, and you bet the fifty you have earned from me so artfully. The judge will rule who has told the biggest lie. Do you accept the bet?'

'Done!' Replied Aina-Kizz.

The bai winked at the judge and, with a malevolent smile, began his story.

'One day, before I was born, I found in my pocket three ears of wheat and threw them out the window. By the next morning, the courtyard of my house had become a field of wheat so extensive, so thick and so tall, that riders took ten days to make their way through it. Shortly after, a whole caravan, with a load of rich silks, was lost in the wheat field and, as much as we looked for them, we could not find them. All of them, merchants, travellers, camels and cargoes disappeared without a trace.

'At the end of summer, when the wheat was ripe, my labourers reaped the harvest, the grain was ground and, with the flour, loaves of bread were made. Not being able to resist the temptation of freshly baked bread, I ate a whole loaf by myself and, what do you think happened? Well, the lost caravan came out of my mouth, with its merchants and travellers, with its camels and its silk cargo, all of them well fed and happy.'

The black-bearded bai was finally silent, displaying a smile of unbearable smugness, while the judge was unable to close his mouth, surprised with the chain of lies that the bai had linked together. But Aina-Kizz remained impassive.

‘Sir, I am not surprised that you are able to tell such great lies, given what you did yesterday to my mother,’ said the girl, ‘but now it is my turn to tell my story.

‘On one occasion, I planted a cottonseed in my garden and the next day a cotton plant had grown all the way up to heaven. It took three days to travel across the shadow that this plant cast on the desert sands. When the cotton was ripe, I picked it and washed it and then I went to sell it in the bazaar. With the money I earned, I bought forty camels, loaded them with rich silks and asked my brother to take the caravan to Bukhara, and then to Khiva.

‘When my brother left, he wore his best silk robe, but for three years I didn’t know anything about what had happened to him, until one day someone told me that a black-bearded bai had assaulted and robbed him, then killed him. Time passed and I lost hope of finding the wicked bai, but today, by chance, I found him.

‘The murderer of my brother is you, bai. Your mouth has betrayed you, by saying that the caravan loaded with rich silks came out of your guts, and you wear the fine silk robe that my brother wore the day he left Samarkand!’

The smile froze on the face of the bai, while the judge dropped his jaw open as if it had come loose from his face.

What could the judge do?

If he said that the girl’s story was an enormous lie, the bai would have to give the girl five hundred gold tankas. But, if he said that the girl was telling the truth, the situation would be even worse for the bai, because the girl could ask for compensation for her brother, in addition to the price of the forty camels and the lost cargo of silk.

The bai’s face flushed as if his head was going to explode.

‘You lie, damn brat! You lie!’ He shouted. ‘It is the biggest lie I have ever heard! Take my five hundred tankas, and my robe, and your mother’s horse and your mule and the firewood! Get out, get out at once! I do not want to see you ever again! Leave me alone! Get out of my sight!’

With a relaxed smile, Aina-Kizz counted the gold coins that the bai had handed to her, wrapped them in the wicked man's silk robe and set out on for home.

When the girl showed her mother everything she had brought with her and had told her everything that had happened, the woman went crazy with joy, thanking heaven for the ingenuity and intelligence of her daughter.

Here ends the story of Aina-Kizz, who teaches us that, while the rich have their fortune, the poor have their ingenuity, and the mental acuity of a girl is better than a man's bag full of gold coins. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2019).

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## Comments

According to the Bechdel test, which is a measure of representation of women in fiction, a fictional work must feature, at least, two women talking to each other about something other than a man.

In the case of a story aimed at illustrating a point in the Earth Charter related to gender equality, Dr Alette Willis, editor consultant of The Earth Stories Collection, suggested we follow this rule in adapting the narratives of the Collection. That is what we have tried to do with this magnificent story adapted by James Riordan. Therefore, the character of Aina-Kizz's father in Riordan's story has been replaced by that of her mother. With this simple change, we not only comply with the Bechdel test's norms cited above, but we also believe that we have given a deeper meaning to this story, reflecting the abuse of power that patriarchal social systems have exerted on women for centuries.

## Sources

Riordan, J. (1984). *The Woman in the Moon, and Other Tales of Forgotten Heroines*, pp. 42-46. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.

### *Associated text of the Earth Charter*

Principle 11b: Promote the active participation of women in all aspects of economic, political, civil, social, and cultural life as full and equal partners, decision makers, leaders, and beneficiaries.

### *Other passages that this story illustrates*

Principle 11: Affirm gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development and ensure universal access to education, health care, and economic opportunity.

